

## Understanding Poverty Through Reflection

This resource was created as part of the Ilfracombe Poverty Truth Commission in 2024. This guide was co-created with senior civic leaders and people with lived experience of poverty. Our heartfelt gratitude to those that shared their lived experiences to help staff build understanding and challenge assumptions.

### Facilitation Guide

#### ➤ Purpose of the Exercise

This reflective activity invites participants to explore the emotional, ethical, and systemic dimensions of poverty. Using a set of carefully designed prompt cards, teams are encouraged to deepen empathy, challenge assumptions, and consider the broader social and structural factors that shape lived experience. Wherever possible, it is encouraged to involve those with lived experience. This may be from within your team if appropriate and safe to do so, or from trained and experienced individuals.

#### ➤ Core Principles

Principle	Application
Trauma-Informed	Prioritise emotional safety, choice, and trust. Avoid triggering/activating language.
Strengths-Based	Highlight resilience, resourcefulness, and dignity.
Inclusive	Use plain language, visual cues, and multiple formats.
Co-Produced	Include lived experience voices in design and delivery.

#### ➤ How to Use the Cards

These cards are intended for use in small teams or facilitated groups, within a psychologically safe and supportive environment. They are designed to spark thoughtful conversation, promote shared understanding, and honour diverse perspectives.

#### ➤ Facilitators are encouraged to:

- Familiarise yourself with trauma-informed principles, including emotional safety, choice, collaboration, and empowerment
- Prepare to hold space for discomfort and diverse perspectives, recognising that conversations may evoke strong emotions or personal reflections
- Support autonomy and emotional safety, participants may choose how and whether to engage with each prompt
- Manage group dynamics with care, gently challenging unhelpful language or assumptions while modelling curiosity and compassion
- Be aware of ongoing support options, and be ready to signpost or refer participants to appropriate services if needed
- Have grounding techniques available, such as breathing exercises or sensory tools, to support regulation and well-being
- Create space for silence, reflection, and emotional processing, allowing participants to move at their own pace

- Acknowledge the complexity of poverty, including its emotional, relational, and systemic dimensions, without requiring personal disclosure

➤ **Session Structure**

**1. Welcome & creating safe space/Grounding (10 mins)**

**Begin by gently welcoming participants and setting the tone for a reflective, emotionally safe session.**

- **Introduce the purpose and values** of the session, including empathy, curiosity, and respect for lived experience
- **Co-create group agreements**, such as What's shared in the room stays in the room (confidentiality); Respect for all voices and experiences; No pressure to share personal stories, participation is always by choice; Self-care is encouraged, participants may step out, pause, or opt out at any time
- **Offer a grounding activity** to support regulation and presence. For example: "Take a moment to notice three things around you, something you can see, hear, or feel. There's no right or wrong, just notice."

**2. Warm-Up Reflection (10 mins)**

**Ease participants into the session with gentle, emotionally resonant prompts that invite reflection without requiring personal disclosure.**

Suggested Prompts (choose one or offer both):

- "What does 'home' mean to you?"
- "How do you define 'security'?"

**Facilitator guidance:**

- Invite participants to reflect individually (e.g., journaling or quiet contemplation) or discuss in pairs, depending on comfort and group dynamics
- Emphasise that there are no right or wrong answers, each person's perspective is valid and valued
- When inviting feedback or sharing, always ask for volunteers rather than directing questions to individuals. For example: "Would anyone like to share something that came up for them?"
- Remind participants that sharing is optional, and silence or passivity is welcome too
- Consider offering a grounding transition before moving on, such as a breath or moment of pause

**3. Card Exploration (30–45 mins)**

**Invite participants to engage with a range of reflective prompts that explore the emotional, ethical, and practical realities of poverty. This section aims to foster a deeper understanding of how poverty influences decision-making, well-being, and access to resources.**

Card Types (choose a mix):

- **Feeling:**  
“How does it feel to be really hungry?”
- **Scenario & Reflection:**  
“You have £10 left. Do you top up the electric meter or pay for the bus fare?”
- **Choice & Dilemma:**  
“What does ‘choice’ mean when you’re living in poverty?”

**Facilitator Guidance:**

- Use **small groups or whole-circle discussion**, depending on group size and emotional safety
- Remind participants that they may engage in whatever way feels safe, through discussion, quiet reflection, or creative expression
- Encourage exploration of.
- **Emotional responses**, what feelings arise? What might others feel in this situation?
- **Practical considerations**, what factors shape decisions? What trade-offs are involved?
- **Systemic influences**, how do policies, services, and societal attitudes impact these scenarios?
- **Personal or observed experiences**, what stories or insights can deepen understanding?

#### **4. Pause & Regulate (5 mins)**

**Create space for emotional processing, regulation, and quiet reflection. This pause supports well-being and helps participants stay grounded during potentially emotive discussions.**

- Offer a short break or grounding moment, such as “Let’s take a few minutes to pause. You might stretch, breathe, or simply sit quietly, whatever feels supportive.”
- Invite participants to step out, journal privately, or engage in a grounding activity if needed
- Consider offering a gentle prompt for reflection and/or journaling, such as: “What’s one feeling or thought that’s come up for you so far?”
- Reaffirm that self-care is welcome and encouraged throughout the session

#### **5. Group Reflection (15 mins)**

**Support participants to process and integrate their insights, emotions, and learning from the session. This reflection helps build collective understanding and encourages thoughtful action.**

**Suggested Prompts:**

- “What surprised you?”
- “What assumptions were challenged?”
- “What do you want to take forward?”

**Facilitator Guidance:**

- Invite participants to share in pairs, small groups, or whole-circle discussion, whatever feels safest and most accessible
- Emphasise that sharing is always optional; listening is a valid and valuable form of participation
- Encourage responses that reflect emotional, ethical, and practical insights, not just intellectual takeaways
- Consider offering sentence starters to support accessibility, such as:
  - “One thing I’m still thinking about is...”
  - “I hadn’t considered...”
  - “I want to explore further...”
- Acknowledge the emotional labour of the session and thank participants for their openness, thoughtfulness, and care
- If appropriate, invite participants to write down one takeaway or commitment to carry forward in their practice or thinking

**6. Closing the session (5 mins)**

**End the session with care, gratitude, and grounding. Acknowledge the emotional labour involved, offer support, and leave participants with a sense of agency and hope**

**Facilitator Guidance:**

- **Thank participants** sincerely for their engagement, openness, and thoughtfulness. “Thank you for showing up so fully today. These conversations can stir deep emotions, and your reflections have been powerful and generous.”
- **Normalise emotional responses** and validate discomfort or sadness as part of meaningful reflection “It’s okay to feel discomfort or sadness. These are valid responses.”
- **Commend self-care**, and honour participants’ emotional boundaries “I appreciate you looking after yourself in this session, take all the time you need.”
- **Provide support options**, including signposting to local services, helplines, or internal wellbeing contacts. Have printed or digital resources available if possible
- **Reaffirm participants’ impact** and invite them to carry forward insights into their role/work/practice “By engaging with these reflections, you’re helping to build more compassionate, inclusive systems. The difference you make, however small, matters deeply.”

## **Optional Formats & Facilitation Tips**

### **Visual & Structural Design**

- Use visual cues such as simple illustrations, icons, or symbols to support accessibility, emotional engagement, and non-verbal processing
- Colour-code the cards by category (e.g., Feeling, Choice & Dilemma, Reflection) to help learners navigate the resource and choose based on comfort or curiosity
- Include lived experience quotes to ground the prompts in real-world insight and validate diverse perspectives
- Use visual cues: Include simple illustrations or icons to support accessibility and emotional engagement.
- Offer layered prompts: Each card could have a primary question and a follow-up to deepen reflection.

### **Prompt Design**

- Offer layered prompts: Each card can include a primary question and an optional follow-up to deepen reflection or explore systemic context
  - Example:  
Primary: “How does it feel to be really hungry?”  
Follow-up: “How might hunger affect your ability to concentrate or interact with others?”
- Create ‘pause and feel’ moments: Invite learners to sit with a feeling before discussing it, allowing space for emotional processing. “Take a moment to notice what comes up for you—there’s no need to respond right away.”

**Card Categories & Example Prompts** (These cards were co-created with people with lived experience of poverty in 2024)

**Feeling Cards — Exploring emotional and physical responses to poverty.**

**These cards invite learners to imagine or recall emotional and physical responses to poverty-related experiences. They are designed to deepen empathy, challenge assumptions, and surface the lived realities behind abstract concepts.**

"How does it feel to be really hungry?" Follow-up: How might hunger affect your ability to concentrate, make decisions, or interact with others?

"You're trying to help your child with their homework, but the heating is off and you're both wearing coats and hats indoors. What does that feel like?" Follow-up: How does being cold impact your ability to support your child and their ability to learn?

"You're heading to a job interview. You feel uncomfortable about the clothes you have, but you cannot afford other clothes. How do you feel?"

"Imagine you've just received a letter saying your benefits are being reviewed. What thoughts or feelings come up?"

"You have £10 left. It's cold. Do you top up the electric meter for heating or purchase food?" (from earlier section—can be cross-referenced). How would you decide?

"You've had to say no to your child's school trip because you can't afford it. What emotions might you experience?"

"You feel you should/ want to buy a gift for a friend or family member; you're walking past shops filled with gifts, but you know you cannot afford any. What emotions come up?"

"You're not able to celebrate in the way society or social media suggests. What feelings might that bring up?"

"Your child comes home upset. They were teased because their uniform is too small and visibly worn out. How do you feel?"

"Your children ask for new trainers, seasonal clothes, or birthday presents, but you have to say no as you cannot afford them. What emotions might arise?"

"You're at a social event and someone makes a joke or comment about people on benefits. How does it feel?" Follow-up: How might experiences like this impact your self-worth or sense of belonging?

You have been informed that your income (salary) will be reduced, and you understand that this means you will be unable to cover your basic living costs/bills. How does this make you feel?

You have a serious illness and are unable to work, statutory sick pay is not enough to support you or your family. How would you feel?

Your Landlord has evicted you with a Section 21 notice, which allows them to reclaim their property without having to state a reason or prove the tenant is at fault. What thoughts or feelings arise?

## 2. Choice & dilemma Cards — Navigating Complex Decisions in Poverty

**These cards present real-life dilemmas that highlight the emotional, ethical, and practical weight of decision-making under poverty. They are designed to foster empathy, challenge assumptions, and surface the systemic pressures that shape everyday choices.**

“You have £10 left. Do you top up the electric meter or pay for the return bus fare to your DWP appointment?” Follow-up: What are the risks of each choice? What might influence your decision?

“Your fridge is empty. You can borrow money from a friend, but you already owe them. Do you ask again?”

“You’ve been offered work experience that you have been assured is a good opportunity that will lead to employment. It will affect your benefits in the short term, placing you into poverty. Do you take it?”

“You’re invited to a family gathering, but you can’t afford a gift. Do you go?”

“You are expecting a baby. You haven’t been able to purchase the nutritious food your midwife advised, and you’re due for another appointment. What do you do?” Follow-up: How might you perceive the midwife will respond when you see her?

Your teenage daughter wants to go to a party with her friends, but you don’t have a car and insist on walking her there and back for her safety. However, she refuses to go, fearing that her friends might bully her about this. What can you do about this?

“You’ve been told to heat your home and ventilate to prevent mould, which could harm your newborn. But you can’t afford the extra heating. Do you follow the advice or try to manage without it?” Follow-up: What are the consequences of each choice? How might this situation be viewed by professionals or child-protection services?

Your daughter must miss school because you cannot afford sanitary protection for her. How do you manage this? How does it make you feel?

“You’ve missed work for a health appointment. Another one is coming up. Do you attend or avoid it to protect your job?”

You have an important medical screening appointment, but the journey involves 4 buses, which you can’t afford, and you have to take your child because there is no one to look after them. Do you miss the screening and hope you will be ok?

You require the internet to access support services and are also expected to travel out of the area to get to appointments. You cannot afford to do both. Which do you choose? Follow-up: What are the consequences of each choice?

### 3. Reflection Cards - Exploring Autonomy, Stigma & Systemic Barriers

**These cards encourage learners to reflect on how poverty intersects with autonomy, dignity, and systemic structures. They are designed to prompt critical thinking, challenge assumptions, and foster compassionate and inclusive practices.**

"What does 'choice' mean when you're living in poverty?"

"How do you decide what to prioritise when everything feels urgent?"

"What assumptions do people make about poverty? How do those assumptions affect people's dignity?"

"What does it mean to be 'resourceful' when you're poor?"

"How do assumptions about poverty show up in everyday conversations or media?" Follow-up: How might this impact someone experiencing poverty?

"Your child was bullied for wearing a worn-out uniform. What assumptions might others make—and how do those assumptions affect your response?" (optional cross-reference from Feeling Cards)

"How does poverty impact your ability to plan for the future?"

"In what ways do societal mechanisms designed to support people in poverty actually create more barriers?" Follow-up: How might these systems be redesigned to promote dignity, autonomy, and trust?

Which societal systems or barriers push people into poverty and keep them trapped within a vicious cycle of poverty? (Look at the model of poverty to support your answer)

